



## ***The Personal is Professional on TV***

# **“The Personal is Paranormal”: Professional Labor on *The X-Files***

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The more and the harder men work, the more they build up that which dominates their work as an alien force, the commodity; so also, the more and the harder the white-collar man works, the more he builds up the enterprise outside himself, which is, as we have seen, duly made a fetish and thus indirectly justified. The enterprise is not the institutional shadow of great men, as perhaps it seemed under the old captain of industry; nor is it the instrument through which men realize themselves in work, as in small-scale production. The enterprise is an impersonal and alien Name, and the more that is placed in it, the less is placed in man (226).

— C. Wright Mills, *White Collar*

## **SECRETS AREN'T ALWAYS HIDDEN**

The Fox Network's *The X-Files* has truly hit the big time. A show that defies easy categorization, it follows FBI agents Dana Scully (played by Gillian Anderson) and Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny) as they investigate cases that defy conventional explanation. After five years of existence, this unlikely product of a television industry noted for playing it safe no longer seems as strange as it once did. Yet it continues to stand out. Although *The X-Files*

regularly places within the top fifteen programs in the Nielsen Ratings, it differs significantly from other top-rated series in the breadth of its popularity. By the beginning of the show's fourth season, Fox was already selling tapes of "classic" episodes from the show, conferring on it a different status than such popular dramas as *ER*. Along with the websites, fan clubs, and conventions that *The X-Files* has inspired, this decision to make the show available for sale and rental testifies to the devotion of its regular viewers. Like *Star Trek*, the series has a tremendous cult following. But whereas the original *Star Trek* series and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* attained their popularity through syndication, *The X-Files* has managed to do so in prime-time. The people who produce the show have been able to have their cake and eat it too, succeeding both within the television mainstream and its marginal currents. The show's move to the big-screen this summer confirms this dual identity. For the first time, a television series has been translated into movie form before its regular broadcast run has ended. *The X-Files* movie is being used both to draw in new viewers for the show's sixth season and to satisfy its long-time fans. Considering that *The X-Files* spent three years in a Friday-night "graveyard" slot on an upstart network that has rarely been able to compete with the United States' Big Three networks (CBS, NBC, ABC), the success of the series is remarkable indeed.

*The X-Files* has not lacked for publicity. In fact, the show avoided being canceled during the low ratings of its first season because it had received such positive reviews in the press. By the middle of its third season, *The X-Files* had become one of the most talked-about shows in the United States. A number of "authorized" and "unauthorized" books appeared on the shelves at American bookstores. The show even inspired a compilation of critical essays that approach the show from an academic perspective. But with all of the coverage that *The X-Files* has received, little attention has been played to its representation of what Ella Taylor calls the "television workplace" (Taylor, 14). It is a show about work. In one sense, this is obvious: any show about people whose job it is to investigate mysteries must be. Yet there is also a way in which the obviousness of a fact can blind us to its significance. We frequently overlook something that is staring us right in the face, and not necessarily by accident. As Louis Althusser puts it, "it is a peculiarity of ideology" that it makes us perceive "obviousnesses as obviousnesses." In other words, we betray the influence of ideology when we withhold our scrutiny from something that is "obvious" to even a casual observer. When we only look for knowledge in the most out-of-the-way places, we overlook the secret to what is staring us right in the face.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, it is telling that commentators on *The X-Files* have largely ignored the way in which the show portrays work. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that work provides the perfect lens through which to look for the real secrets of *The X-Files*.

### FILE IT AWAY IN A SLIM FOLDER

Before we examine the work that Scully and Mulder do in greater depth, some background is necessary. The X-Files are cases for which investigators could find no plausible explanation that have been sent to the FBI for a second look. The narrative structure of a typical episode of *The X-Files* is based on the hour-long detective drama, particularly as it is inflected by the "partnership" sub-genre made famous in shows like *Starsky and Hutch* and *Cagney and Lacey*.<sup>2</sup> But *The X-Files* also exhibits some significant deviations from this format. Unlike the majority of shows about "partners in detection," *The X-Files* pairs two highly educated, white professionals of the opposite sex. But although the show has presented its two protagonists with many opportunities to pursue a sexual liaison, their relationship has remained platonic. Nonetheless, it is a relationship with the complexity of a love relationship.<sup>3</sup> To put this in reductive but revealing terms, sexuality is displaced "upward" without weakening the bond that couples Scully and Mulder. Their substitute for sex is conversation. This is where the push-and-pull we associate with more intimate "partnerships" manifests itself.

Playful repartee is a commonplace of sexual comedy, prominent whenever the "act" itself is foreclosed by exigencies of plot or propriety. But it plays a particularly important role in stories that feature a powerful woman. In classic screwball comedies such as *His Girl Friday* and their contemporary descendants like *Broadcast News*, the status of women as working professionals is a source of productive tension. For the most part, no matter how daringly these stories play with cultural norms, they lead to an ideological closure in which the woman is "domesticated," whether it be by giving herself to a man or giving up her work. She frequently does both, surrendering her profession in surrendering to her man (Basinger, 130-147). Even if she is regarded more affectionately than Shakespeare's shrew, this working woman must still be tamed.

Part of what has made *The X-Files* so intriguing is the way in which it has managed to shy away from such blatant ideological closure. Although Scully is smart and stubborn, she has neither given herself to a man nor given up her profession. In part, this is simply a good marketing decision: when Joel and Maggie finally did the deed on *Northern Exposure*, it marked the beginning of the show's surprisingly rapid decline. But there is more to it than that. *The X-Files'* creator Chris Carter has pointedly remarked that he does not want his protagonists' relationship to be like the one on *Moonlighting*, in which the sexual tension between the characters played by Cybill Shepherd and Bruce Willis was foregrounded to the detriment of plot development. There are different degrees of sublimation and Scully and Mulder have achieved a high one. The sexual tension between them is not only displaced, but it is also dampened by both their topics of conversation and their relatively affectless delivery.<sup>4</sup> It is their work that comes first.

*The X-Files* has made a great deal out of the different attitudes with which Scully and Mulder approach their research into paranormal phenomena. Scully

practices forensic medicine. Mulder's background is in psychology: he made a name for himself with the FBI because of his facility for understanding the way serial killers think. This difference in the two detectives' training manifests itself in the approach they take to their work. Most of the time, Scully insists that what initially seems inexplicable can be explained with science. She wants to show how the paranormal is really normal. By contrast, Mulder is more willing to acknowledge the existence of the paranormal. If Scully is a skeptic, he is a "believer," or at least he wants to be. There is a poster on the wall above his desk at the FBI that declares "I want to believe." As Rhonda Wilcox and J.P. Williams point out, this contrast between Scully and Mulder adds another dimension to the series' take on gender, for "the program appears to advocate an ideology in which Mulder and Scully are free to invert traditional male/female characterizations" in which "Scully represents the rationalistic worldview usually associated with men, while Mulder regularly advocates supernatural explanations and a reliance on intuition traditionally connected with women" (Wilcox and Williams, 99). In other words, it is Scully who normally assumes the role of the "man of science"—an incongruity that resonates through her partnership with Mulder. There are numerous ways in which *The X-Files* complicates this opposition between skeptic and believer. From time to time, the protagonists will temporarily switch roles. Either Scully will want to believe or Mulder will want to disbelieve. Moreover, the show has been careful to point out that Scully looks more favorably on religion than Mulder does. But despite these important qualifications, the show is still structured by the opposition between Scully's desire to perceive the world as normal and Mulder's desire not to discount the paranormal. This opposition provides the pattern for most of their conversations. Mulder leaps to an improbable conclusion; Scully counters that there must be a scientific explanation; and in the end, neither one of them is proved entirely right or wrong.

In addition to featuring somewhat unconventional "partners in detection," *The X-Files* also presents an unconventional picture of detective work. Conventional mysteries plod methodically towards narrative closure. But even the most self-contained episodes of *The X-Files* preserve a disconcerting degree of open-endedness. Just as the show resists the sort of closure in which the professional woman is domesticated, it also rejects the sort in which all loose ends are tied up. Multiple causes are proposed for almost every event. And as even less-than-loyal viewers know, the standard one-hour episode of *The X-Files* is situated within an overarching narrative in which the paranormal phenomena catalogued in the FBI's X-Files are imbricated in a dense grid of governmental and para-governmental conspiracy. As one article puts it, *The X-Files* "walks an intermediate path between the episodic series and the open-ended serial, one that is for the most part episodic but in which certain ongoing plot lines carry across episodes and even seasons." Like the *Star Trek* series, it is "a cumulative narrative" (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein, 33).<sup>5</sup> This cumulative narrative is foregrounded in the show's multi-part episodes, which not only bridge television seasons in typical cliffhanger fashion, but also occur mid-season. Moreover, there is always the

possibility that even those episodes that confine themselves to the exploration of a discrete phenomenon may provide clues to this conspiracy. Because a particular case can never be authoritatively closed, the work that Scully and Mulder do proceeds without a sense of true completion.

### THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Perhaps the best way to approach *The X-Files*' portrayal of work is to focus on its portrayal of what is not work. Work is traditionally identified with a place: an office, a factory, or a number of different locations linked together by a route. This is why we use the word “workplace” as a substitute for the word “work.” The place we think of as most clearly contrasting with the workplace is the home. When we think of what is not work, what we can call “not-work,” we think of the home. Although we have to do tasks at home, we do not normally think of them as equivalent to the tasks we do at work. In the popular imagination, home is where we believe ourselves to have stopped working, where we relax, where we unburden ourselves from the cares of the workday. In short, home is our refuge from work.<sup>6</sup>

In his controversial study of family life in modern society, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*, Christopher Lasch argues that this idea of the home as a refuge is a by-product of the rise of a capitalist economic system in which “work came to be seen as merely a means to an end.” As it became increasingly difficult for people to appreciate the fruits of their labor, “work had to be redefined as a way of achieving satisfactions or consolations outside work.” This led to a “radical separation between work and leisure and between public life and private life.” Unfortunately, the home’s status as “compensation” for the injuries of work was provisional, for “the very conditions that gave rise to the need to view privacy and the family as a refuge from the larger world made it more and more difficult for the family to serve in that capacity” (Lasch, 6-8). As Lasch sees it, although the home provided a refuge from work in the nineteenth century, it has increasingly failed to provide one in the twentieth century. The problem is that “the same forces that have impoverished work and civic life invade the private realm and its last stronghold, the family” (Lasch, xxiii). But their influence on the home is most obvious, not in the law of the market itself, but in the “professionalization” of society in which subjection to that law has resulted. Lasch chronicles the role government officials, doctors, and social workers have played in taking power out of parents’ hands and putting it at the disposal of the state or state-sanctioned organizations. The end result, he concludes, is a society in which parents lose confidence in their own beliefs and intuitions and turn to outside experts for guidance in caring for their families. Parents become alienated, not only from their professional labor as workers, but also from their personal labor as parents. In the process, the home is stripped of its privacy. It becomes a “home” that lacks the qualities we learn to associate with home, a “homeless home.”

This homeless home is the only home we see on *The X-Files*.<sup>7</sup> Whether we are inside the soulless apartments of Scully and Mulder or the homes of their parents or siblings, we know that we are in a place of danger. The home provides no protection and almost no comfort. Although countless scenes from the show have made this point, a key story arc from early in *The X-Files*' second season does so in particularly dramatic fashion. The first part of this three-part story (with a self-contained episode between the second and third parts) opens with a flashback in which a man, Duane Berry, is apparently abducted by aliens ("Duane Berry").<sup>8</sup> At the start of the scene, we zoom in on the outside of his house, then cut to an inspection of its interior. Berry is asleep, the television still blaring near his bed. Then the room lights up. What seemed to be a solid bedroom wall becomes as transparent as the thinnest of Japanese paper screens. We are once again outside the house, looking in on the man past silhouettes of strange-looking humanoid figures. This time, there is no cut necessary: we can see inside his house without moving from an exterior shot to an interior shot. The scene has collapsed the distinction between inside and outside, between the home and the dangers from which it provides refuge.

After this flashback, we move into the present time of the story. Berry is holding a number of people hostage. Because he claims to have been abducted by aliens on several occasions and fears that they are coming back for him, Mulder is called in to mediate. Berry tells Mulder that he is hoping to give the aliens a hostage as a substitute for himself. After tense negotiations, the hostage situation is resolved when snipers wound Berry. As the hour draws to a close, we see him in his hospital room. It is calm. Suddenly, the warning signs that an abduction is imminent are repeated. He flees the hospital in fear. We then cut to a shot of what turns out to be Mulder's apartment. The camera shows the inside of a front door lit up by a flash of lightning, then pans down in darkness until his answering machine is revealed by another flash. We then cut to a shot of Scully in her home. She is calling Mulder to relay an important discovery about Berry. As the scene unfolds, we cut back and forth between Scully's lit, occupied apartment and Mulder's dark, empty one, *synechdochically* figured in the image of his answering machine. While Scully is leaving her message, Berry suddenly appears at her window. The hour ends with another shot of Mulder's answering machine. We hear the sound of breaking glass and Scully's cries for help. The second hour opens with another sort of flashback. Mulder has heard her frantic message, but arrives at her home to find a police line ("Ascension"). She is gone. As Mulder walks up to her broken front window and then into her apartment, he has brief visions of her abduction, a flashback in which he sees something he was not there to witness.

There are many similarities between the two abductions in this episode. Berry does to Scully what he believes has been done to him. Her abduction resonates with his own. Both of them are forcibly taken from their own homes. Both learn how easily their privacy can be violated. This is a message about the vulnerability of personal space, a message *The X-Files* repeatedly underscores.

But there is something more subtle going on here. The details in Scully’s abduction tell us just as much about work as they do about the home. Mulder is not home because he is still at work. And, although she is home, Scully is still working. Her call to Mulder is a professional phone call. The man who appears outside her window is the man she is talking about. In a way, Berry’s arrival is like some divinely ordained punishment for bringing her work home with her. To the extent that she fails to protect her home from the pressures of the professional, she can be considered complicit in her own abduction.

We are familiar with the concept of a “home away from home,” but here we encounter a home that is almost always shown to be “work away from work.” The same goes for almost every place in *The X-Files*. As the scene we just examined suggests, the phone plays a central role in this blurring of the distinction between work and home. When Scully and Mulder are not calling each other at home—usually to leave a message—they are calling each other on their cellular phones. In fact, the sequence in which they converse over their cellular phones about the meaning of evidence is probably the most common in the show, and clearly forms part of the permanent lattice-work in and through which particular narratives are woven. Although there are a number of conclusions we could draw from this, the most important one is obvious: Scully and Mulder’s devotion to work is the devotion of an addict. As Wilcox and Williams put it in a discussion of Scully and Mulder’s sublimated sexuality, both detectives seem “to place professional over private life” to such an extent that the “parallel male-female pairings and the conversational cures suggest that their professional lives are their personal lives” (Wilcox and Williams, 115).

As many commentators on the changing American workplace have noted, the problem of setting boundaries is an acute one for white-collar professionals whose work schedules are less and less like the standard nine-to-five day of years past. There was a time when most people had a regimented workday like that of the blue-collar middle-class. But with the decline in traditional manufacturing jobs, principles for which unions fought such as the eight-hour workday are no longer so influential. And whether white-collar professionals realize it or not, they are facing the consequences. Jeremy Rifkin notes that “many companies prefer to employ a smaller workforce at longer hours rather than a larger one at shorter hours to save the cost of providing additional benefits, including health care and pensions” (Rifkin, 223). Within the context of this transformation of the workday, it has become increasingly common for professionals to bring their work home with them. This difficulty in separating work from home is particularly acute for professionals who do not have a partner or paid housekeeper to do the cooking and cleaning. They come home from work to face the work of home. For many of them, the home frequently turns into a place to do both the work of home and the work that they were unable to complete at work.<sup>9</sup>

The rapidly increasing number of positions that make it possible for people to work full-time or part-time in their own homes complicates this picture of the

overworked professional. Futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler argue that the ongoing transformation of the workplace actually “re-empowers the family and the home” because, as “an estimated thirty million Americans now do some part of their work at home, often using computers, faxes and other Third Wave technologies,” they have the opportunity to spend a great deal more time away from work than their predecessors a generation or two before (Toffler, 86). For positive thinkers like the Tofflers, “tele-commuting” has the potential to offset the negative aspects of the new economic order. But it is a largely unrealized potential. Presently, the majority of professionals who work at home are also obliged to work elsewhere. Their home computers, fax machines, and pagers are an extension of the office, not a substitute for it. In confronting these developments, we are faced with a question inspired by Lasch’s thesis in *Haven in a Heartless World*: does doing work at home deprive the home of its status as a refuge from the burdens of work? *The X-Files* indicates that it does.

Of course, there is a difference between being asked to bring work home and bringing it home without being asked. This difference marks the divide between the overworked and the workaholic. Scully and Mulder so clearly fall into this latter category that their supervisor must repeatedly tell them to stop working. This is particularly true of Mulder, who takes an order to stop working as a sign that there is more work to be done. In one episode from the middle of the fourth season, he is forced to take time off because he has accumulated so much vacation time that the FBI informs him he must “use it or lose it” (“Never Again”). Mulder is convinced that powers both within his organization and outside of it have a vested interest in limiting his productivity. As a consequence, he invests his work with a purpose that frequently puts him at cross-purposes with the people he works for. His work becomes something different than the work of the standard FBI operative. And by helping him to sustain and sometimes strengthen his relation to work, Scully behaves like a classic co-dependent. This is where the importance of their close, but non-sexual relationship manifests itself. Initially, she cannot maintain a boundary between work and home because he cannot. He is obsessed with his work and she feels the need to support his obsession. But she rapidly becomes as involved with their investigations as he is. For workaholics like Scully and Mulder, the home functions like any other workplace. Because they fail to preserve any of the positive qualities we associate with home, they are functionally homeless. There really is no place like home, because every place looks like work.

### TAKING IT PERSONALLY

Why do Scully and Mulder let their work take over their lives? The work’s importance has something to do with it. Doctors, police, and other people who do work that is a matter of life and death frequently have a similar problem. No doubt this is why the majority of successful shows that focus on the workplace have been hospital and crime dramas. Exposing conspiracies with potentially dire conse-

quences for the planet would certainly qualify as work of a similar life-and-death magnitude. But it is not enough that the work matters objectively, it has to matter to the person doing it. Like the doctors on *ER*, the police on *NYPD Blue*, or the lawyers on *Murder One*, Scully and Mulder do not really cross the line separating hard workers from workaholics until they become personally involved. They have to make the work their own.

In the pilot to the series, Mulder reveals to Scully that his interest in paranormal phenomena originates in a childhood trauma that occurred when he was twelve years old: the abduction of his eight-year-old sister from the bedroom they shared. He tells Scully that he is convinced aliens were responsible. When he began work at the FBI, it was as an expert on serial killers. It was not until he became interested in the FBI's files on unexplained phenomena that he became personally involved in his work. Working on the X-Files is not merely a professional assignment, but a personal quest to retroactively make sense of his sister's disappearance. Over the years, Mulder's sense of purpose has been complicated by the realization that both his father and mother have been involved in the conspiracy that impedes his work. Not only is he searching for his long-lost sister, he is also seeking to make sense of his family's problematic past.

It takes considerably longer for Scully to make the work her own. In the show's pilot we learn that she has been assigned to be his partner because powerful people connected with the FBI want to see the X-Files exposed as a lie. But by the end of the pilot, Scully is already developing respect for Mulder's work, even if she finds it hard to give his conclusions much credence. Nevertheless, she retains a distance to her work that he lacks. As we have already seen, Scully plays the role of the “man of science” in contrast to her less conventional partner. She is dispassionate where he exhibits passion and disinterested where he acts on the basis of self-interest. But the show has not been content to leave this contrast unquestioned. Instead, it has put Scully through a series of experiences that could lead to her being “converted” to the believer's side. Taken as a whole, these experiences comprise a story that combines the structure of a conversion narrative, in which the conversion process is successful, and a temptation narrative, in which that process is forestalled. She starts to believe, then reverts to her prior disbelief. In this respect, the story of her conversion and reversion resembles religious narratives such as *Pilgrim's Progress*, but with this difference: it is not Scully's faith in God that is tested, but her faith in science.<sup>10</sup> As she submits the X-Files to the scrutiny of objective testing, she finds her own objectivity tested by experiences for which the “normal science” she practices is unable to account.<sup>11</sup>

Scully's abduction figures prominently among the experiences in which she is tested. The second hour of the three-part abduction episode follows Mulder as he tries to track down his missing partner. He finds her abductor Duane Berry, but not Scully herself. Berry tells Mulder that she vanished in a burst of light like the one that accompanied his own abduction (“Ascension”). In the third hour

(separated from the first two by a self-contained episode in which Mulder works alone), Scully reappears mysteriously in a hospital (“One Breath”). She is in a coma. The episode ends with her regaining consciousness. By the following week’s episode, she is back at work.<sup>12</sup> But although she seems to pick up where she left off, she is unable to put her abduction behind her. In fact, she has been dealing with its effects ever since. First she discovers that a highly sophisticated computer chip was implanted at the base of her skull during her abduction. Then she makes contact with other women who suffered the same fate, discovering that they eventually contract inoperable cancer and die. In the middle of the fourth season, she becomes ill herself and learns that the shadowy government conspiracy against The X-Files might have a cure.

All of these developments in Scully’s story have given her a personal interest in the work she does on the X-Files to match Mulder’s. And, although she still holds out for a properly scientific approach to their research, the critical distance scientists strive for is something more and more difficult for her to maintain. Lisa Parks explains that Scully’s experiences lead to “a shift in her scientific practice,” exhibiting a skepticism of “scientific rational explanations” that “coincides with the feminist claim that science must be understood as a relational process rather than an objective, masculine ideal” (Parks, 124). Similarly, comparing Scully to the character Clarice Starling—played by Jodie Foster—in Jonathan Demme’s film *Silence of the Lambs*, Wilcox and Williams invoke Adriene Donald’s point that Starling comes to learn that “what she had thought would protect her—that is, the impersonality of her aspiring professionalism—reveals its own dangers in the world that she has entered” (Wilcox and Williams, 103). Scully’s professionalism is shown to present similar problems. She may not want to make the work her own, but her experiences make her do so.

Scully does not renounce her faith in science, but is forced to confront its limitations. Almost every episode presents her with an unexplained phenomenon for which she can find no clear-cut explanation. She invariably counters Mulder’s theories with theories of her own. However, although she grounds her theories in “normal science,” they are as difficult to verify as Mulder’s. In struggling to fit the evidence to existing paradigms, she frequently offers conjectures that are as implausible as Mulder’s. When she does this, she makes “normal science” sound like another “conspiracy.”<sup>13</sup> Scully is least likely to be “converted” to Mulder’s theories when they concern her own condition. While she is frequently willing to concede that there are flaws in “normal science,” she is reluctant to forego it in analyzing herself. This is particularly obvious in episodes that refer back to her abduction. In order to learn more about her abduction, she consents to undergo repression hypnosis, but breaks her first session off abruptly and refuses to return. This distrust of alternative treatment resurfaces during her illness. When she first learns that she has cancer, she recognizes that there is almost no hope for a conventional cure. In spite of this realization, she opts to have her cancer treated by the “normal science” of the medical profession. She does not want to believe that the X-Files could hold the secret to her survival. But the show also makes it

clear that it takes tremendous willpower for her to turn her back on the possibility of alternative treatment. In a sense, Scully’s refusal to find hope in the X-Files implies that she would rather die than renounce her belief in science. On the one hand, she rejects the personal for the professional: she is a doctor herself. On the other hand, her investment in the professional is undeniably personal. To give up her objectivity would be to give up her identity. She tries to prevent her personal motives from intruding on her work, but has personal motives for doing so.

The irony in this predicament is that it is Scully’s dedication to her work on the X-Files that is responsible for her becoming the subject of an X-File in the first place. Her personal traumas cannot be dissociated from her professional activity. In the end, her inability to separate herself from her work is confirmed by the fact that she loses consciousness and is cured against her will with the help of the same shadowy forces that were implicated in her abduction. As if to make the point even more explicit, an episode from the just-completed fifth season reveals that her abduction has not only led to her illness but to the birth of a child (“Christmas Carol”). Scully becomes a mother without even realizing it. Her profession truly has full control over her personal life.

### ALIENATED LABOR

*The X-Files* has always associated violations of privacy with the paranormal. The question is where to fit the professional into this picture. The boundary between work and home is blurred when people become personally involved in their work. And as we have seen, both Scully and Mulder have extremely good reasons for becoming personally involved in the X-Files. Their refusal to stop working when they are told to do so causes their lives to become imbricated in their object of study. If they were not workaholics, they would never have discovered such good reasons for being workaholics. This is a paradoxical formulation. But it indicates how we should go about theorizing the place of work on *The X-Files*.

People who work in organizations like the FBI have a different relation to their work than the industrial workers on whom Marx focused. Their work does not result in the same sort of product. In his analysis of bureaucracies, Max Weber paid particular attention to this difference, noting that “the management of the modern office is based upon written documents (‘the files’)” that are managed by “a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts” (Weber, 197). In other words, though their labor differs from that of factory workers, these “subaltern officials and scribes” do produce something: files. And this has remained the case from the time when files were written by hand, through the time when they were typewritten, up until the present day in which the majority of files are computer files. However, unlike the products produced by blue-collar workers, files are rarely commodities in the traditional sense. Although files may be valuable, they are not usually exchanged on the market in the way that automobiles or computers are.

This is the key to understanding the peculiar status of the X-Files. Because capitalism cuts us off from the products of our labor, we desire the products on which our labor was expended. We imagine that we can “buy back” that part of ourselves we have lost in laboring for wages. Of course, we cannot really buy it back. But when we feel we can, we are engaged in what Marx called “commodity fetishism.” We are psychically investing commodities with a power that really derives from ourselves. This “investment” produces what we might call, in homage to the work of Walter Benjamin, the “aura of the commodity.” Files are not commodities in the classic sense of the term. But to the extent that they represent the congealed labor of the people who get paid to produce them, they are invested with an aura not unlike the one people invest in commodities. And like the aura of the commodity, the aura invested in all files that are produced for pay is something of a “mystery.” Because the X-Files contain information about mysteries analogous to this one, however, they tell the truth of their own production in ways that other files do not. In this sense, the truth that is “out there,” to quote the show’s motto, is that white-collar professionals working under capitalism are alienated from their labor and its product much as industrial workers are. They may get paid better than those industrial workers, but they still find themselves caught up in a process that separates them from their labor and, by extension, from a part of themselves.

*The X-Files* complicates this picture of the white-collar professional. When workers produce files that conceal their personal labor, they come to regard all files as impersonal. Files appear to be the product, not of human labor, but of bureaucracies with a life of their own. In describing how this process works in organizations, Antonio Gramsci writes that “if each one of the single members considers the collective organism to be a body extraneous to themselves, it is obvious that this organism no longer exists in reality but becomes a phantom of the intellect, a fetish” (Gramsci, 14). This model remains relevant for present-day society. By itself, however, it does not offer an adequate explanation for the depiction of labor in *The X-Files*. As we have already seen, Scully and Mulder do not produce files from which traces of their labor are erased. The X-Files “belong” to them in a sense. It is their project to investigate them, no one else’s. Files are frequently left incomplete because of outside interference, but the files still remain within their purview. Furthermore, many of the files they produce are connected in some way to their personal lives. Unlike the type of workers on whom the model of “alienated labor” was originally based, Scully and Mulder do not experience a “radical separation between work and leisure and between public life and private life.” The work they do differs markedly from the sort of work that is a means of “achieving satisfactions or consolations outside work” (Lasch, 6-7).

Forecasting transformations in the global economy, economist Robert Reich predicts that most high-paying jobs in the future will belong to “symbolic analysts,” who “solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols”

simplifying reality into "abstract images that can be rearranged, juggled, experimented with, communicated to other specialists, and then, eventually, transformed back into reality." These are tasks traditionally associated with the professional middle class, which Barbara Ehrenreich describes as "all those people whose economic and social status is based on education, rather than the ownership of capital or property" (Ehrenreich, 12). But Reich takes pains to point out that the classification of a job as "professional" no longer means that much. Many so-called professionals perform repetitive labor that involves little or no flexibility of mind. He gives the example of lawyers who "spend their entire working lives doing things that normal people would find unbearably monotonous" and managers who "take no more responsibility than noting who shows up for work in the morning, making sure they stay put, and locking up the place at night" (Reich, 1992, 181). A white-collar worker who falls into this category is a professional in name only. As Ehrenreich puts it, the difference between someone who merely does "mental work" and a true professional is that the latter is "granted far more autonomy in his or her work and is expected to be fairly self-directing much of their time. In fact his or her job is often to define the work of others: to conceptualize—and command" (Ehrenreich, 13). It is this freedom to think that defines the symbolic analyst.

In contrast to those so-called professionals who perform repetitive labor within a highly structured chain of command, symbolic analysts are less tightly bound within organizational structures and thereby tend to "work alone or in small teams" (Reich, 1992, 178-179). This relative freedom from organizational constraint permits them to think systematically, avoiding the tendency to "view reality as a series of static snapshots." In other words, it is their task to make connections by "seeing the whole," to "try to discern larger causes, consequences, and relationships" (Reich, 1992, 230-231). Although they work for a large bureaucracy, Scully and Mulder clearly fit this description of the symbolic analyst. Their work continually confronts them with questions for which there is no clear answer, forcing them to improvise. In addition, it presents them with situations that demand to be understood relationally. They are able to perceive connections where other people are not. This capacity for totalizing thought gives them an insight that most bureaucratic workers lack. That Scully and Mulder are personally involved with the *X-Files* indicates that they have a much different relation to the products of their labor than do workers in the standard Marxist model.

*The X-Files'* preoccupation with stories that feature identical or nearly identical people (or beings that look like people) takes on new meaning in this light. Scully and Mulder differentiate themselves from typical FBI agents by investigating plots to make people look and act the same. The two-part story arc that bridged the series' third and fourth seasons provides a particularly illuminating example. The first hour focuses on Jeremiah Smith, a savior-like figure who just happens to be one of several apparently identical men working at branches

of the Social Security Administration. In one Orwellian scene, representatives of the government conspiracy remove him from his workplace, a huge room filled with white-collar workers in their cubicles. None of his co-workers seem to care. As a worker, he is anonymous. His miraculous powers are completely hidden. The implication is that even gods are unable to transcend the undifferentiated mass of bureaucracy (“Talitha Cumi”). In the second episode, Mulder travels with Smith to an experimental farm in the wilds of Canada where the workers are cloned children who work with the mindless efficiency of robots. Not surprisingly, there is a dramatic scene involving a huge beehive. The implication is clear: the children have all the individuality of bees (“Herrenvolk”). It’s a fitting metaphor for the condition of anonymity in a society dominated by massive, impersonal systems.

In his musings on the future of human-made structures, high-tech guru Kevin Kelly discusses bees at considerable length.

Their collective mind must transcend their small bee minds. As we wire ourselves up in a hivish network, many things will emerge that we, as mere neurons in the network, don’t expect, don’t understand, can’t control, or don’t perceive. That’s the price for any emergent hive mind (Kelly, 28).

But it is not a price that Scully and Mulder are willing to pay. For all of their familiarity with indeterminacy, they still hold out hope that “the truth is out there” to be discovered. They are not content to become bureaucrats without an interest in the big picture.

It is instructive to note here that Robert Reich uses the word “drone” as a metaphor in his analyses of the contemporary workplace. People engaged in “stodgy, routine work within structured organizations,” whether they are in traditionally unionized blue-collar jobs, the service sector, or even white-collar jobs that involve moving “the same pieces of paper over and over” are all to be classified as “drones.” They are workers with “little opportunity for discretion” and “little need for creativity,” functionally interchangeable insofar as “someone could always be found to do the same work” (Reich, 1987, 108).<sup>14</sup> In other words, “drones” are the exact opposite of symbolic analysts. They represent everything that *The X-Files*’ protagonists are not.

### **PROFESSIONAL PRIVILEGE**

But if Scully and Mulder are not the sort of workers whose individuality is suppressed, then why is *The X-Files* so obsessed with alienation? Part of the answer lies in the provisional status of their positions. Although they do the work of symbolic analysts, they are constantly threatened with the prospect of becoming drones. The freedom they have is a function of their involvement with the X-Files. If their work is terminated, they will revert to being ordinary FBI agents.

This is made clear early in the show’s second season, when the X-Files have been temporarily shut down. At the beginning of one episode, we see Mulder doing the personally and professionally unrewarding task of monitoring an FBI wire-tap (“Little Green Men”). His frustration is palpable. It is this sort of work that he will do anything to avoid. And, while Scully seems less hostile towards the regular work of the Bureau, her reaction when the X-Files are in danger of being shut down implies that she would greatly miss the work herself.

Scully and Mulder’s anxieties about being reduced to drones are not peculiar. Professionals are confronted with an increasingly unstable economy in which job security is rapidly disappearing. For symbolic analysts, the problem is particularly acute. Their income is not necessarily related to “how much time they put in or the quantity of work they put out.” Moreover, their careers do not “proceed along well-defined paths to progressively higher levels of responsibility and income.” Although they may be wildly successful when they are young, “they may lose authority and income if they are no longer able to innovate by building on their cumulative experience, even if they are quite senior” (Reich, 1992, 178-179). In other words, they suffer from “fear of falling,” (Ehrenreich).<sup>15</sup> Considered from this perspective, Scully and Mulder’s investigation into all things alien can be read as an attempt to make sense, not of the work they do in the present, but of the less desirable forms of work that haunt it.<sup>16</sup>

This would also explain *The X-Files*’ fixation on people from the lower and lower-middle classes who experience their marginality in particularly intense ways. As one recent *TV Guide* article on the series put it, while “*The X-Files* has had plenty of little green man-type aliens,” it has also “increasingly explored *social* alienation as well—involving disenfranchised groups such as POWs from the Vietnam War and illegal immigrants from Mexico” (Schindler and Williams, 20). The powerlessness that these sorts of people feel in the hands of their abductors reinforces the powerlessness that marks their everyday lives. It is precisely this sense of powerlessness that Scully and Mulder work so hard to overcome. Although Scully and Mulder make the work their own, they are always in danger of having it taken away from them. From this perspective, their work takes on new meaning. They investigate people in order to avoid becoming like them. It is how they ward off their fear of falling.

By itself, this reading is insufficient. As the stories of Scully’s abduction and Mulder’s childhood imply, their involvement with the paranormal is not that of detached observers. They do not merely investigate alienation; they experience it. Why is this? The answer lies in the inter-penetration of work and home. *The X-Files* has not been especially attentive to the ways in which capitalism could be connected to the personal or the paranormal. Money rarely comes up. The absence of capitalism from a narrative that points towards practically all other forms of conspiratorial agency implies an ideological blindspot. Considering that *The X-Files* is first and foremost a means of making profit, this is not surprising. However, although the series does not include capitalism in its network of interlocking conspiracies—it is unable to altogether ignore its effects.<sup>17</sup> In

showing how the distinctions between professional and personal life have collapsed, *The X-Files* presents a less optimistic picture than most prophets of the new economic order. Because Scully and Mulder have a personal connection to the product of their labor, they do not lose a part of themselves in the way that most workers do. But it is difficult to determine what they win.

Scully and Mulder avoid acting like the “drones” who blindly follow the orders of their superiors in large organizations like the FBI. But they do so at the price of being workaholics. This is alluded to in an episode from early in the show’s fourth season. Set in the superficially trouble-free town of Home, Pennsylvania, it tells the tale of a family of in-bred man-monsters who have abducted a woman in order to perpetuate their line. Needless to say, the depiction of their life at home is less than pleasant. But in addition to making the concept of “home” even more problematic, this episode also makes explicit reference to its protagonists’ potentially unhealthy relation to work. In a rare moment of blissful nostalgia, Mulder recalls his upbringing in a place where home seemed safe. He notes that you “never had to lock your doors. No modems. No faxes. No cell phones.” Scully offers a dead-pan reply: “Mulder, if you had to do without a cell phone for two minutes, you’d lapse into catatonic schizophrenia” (“Home”).<sup>18</sup> This comment is profoundly illuminating. Most people who work for wages under capitalism could be said to operate in a state of “catatonic schizophrenia” in that they are split off from a part of themselves, but walk around unconscious of their own alienation. Scully and Mulder avoid this problem, but face a new one. Their cell phones may make it easier for them to avoid the split-consciousness that plagues the average worker, but it also facilitates their workaholism. Because their identity is inextricably bound up with the work that they do, it is difficult to determine what was really theirs to begin with. In their case, the collapse of the distinction between personal and professional life means that the personal is collapsed into the professional. They invest so much of themselves in their work that there is nothing personal left over.

Although the abstractness of Scully and Mulder’s alienation makes it difficult to pin down, one of *The X-Files*’ most common tropes helps to make sense of it. The show has repeatedly explored situations in which people lose time. For example, in an episode with the witty title “Time Flies,” Mulder investigates the downing of a commercial airliner in which the only clue is a discrepancy between the official time of the crash and the time indicated on the dead passengers’ watches (“Tempis Fugit”). This discrepancy marks the intrusion of the paranormal into normal lives. More specifically, it signals that an abduction has taken place. The time during which a person is experiencing abduction simply disappears. But what is this loss of time if not a metaphor for the loss experienced by people who spend the better part of their lives working? Scully and Mulder may not lose a part of themselves, but they lose the time in which to be something other than workers. They have a personal relation to the work they do, but only because they have succumbed to “the perversion of the most intimate relation-

ships by the calculating, manipulative spirit that has long been ascendant in business life” (Lasch, 166). This is why the most intimate details of their lives confront them as X-Files.

In closing, it is important to emphasize that, unlike most of the people they investigate, Scully and Mulder at least have the privilege of comprehending their alienation in abstract form. They are paid to investigate. And, despite the interference they receive from within the government, their status as FBI agents both provides them access to classified information and protects them from harm. The civilians who research the paranormal on their own are not so lucky. A number of episodes start with the death or disappearance of one of these civilian researchers. Scully and Mulder pick up where they left off, putting their institutional backing to good use. No matter how marginalized they are within the FBI, they still represent the authorities. Although they act in solidarity with outsiders, they are still insiders to the bureaucratic “hive.”<sup>19</sup> They may experience their personal lives as paranormal, but that experience is always mediated by their existence as professionals. They can be self-reflexive about their alienation in ways that average citizens cannot.

With this in mind, it is interesting to see what Barbara Ehrenreich has to say about the relationship between middle-class professionals and the less-privileged sectors of society into which they are anxious to avoid falling. “We seldom see the ‘others’ except as projections of our own anxieties or instruments of our ambitions, and even when seeing them—as victims, ‘cases,’ or exemplars of some archaic virtue—seldom hear” (Ehrenreich, 257). Because it is the business of *The X-Files* to transform everyday anxieties into something supernatural, the show is clearly responsible for the sort of projection that Ehrenreich warns against.

But it also does something else. Even if *The X-Files* fails to make the “others” familiar, it manages to make professionals seem strange. They become cases just like everybody else. Considering what professionals must do in order to make connections with less-privileged people, Ehrenreich asks whether there is “a way to ‘re-embod[y]’ the middle class’s impersonal mode of discourse”—the sort of discourse that bureaucrats, scientists, and professors habitually use—“so that it no longer serves to conceal the invisible and variable speaker? For we may need to find ourselves in the language of abstraction, if we are ever to find the “others” of daily life.” She goes on to suggest that it is only through such a process of self-discovery that professionals will be able to discover the less-privileged, not “as aliens, not as projections of inner fear,” but as fellow human beings (Ehrenreich, 259-60). Maybe this is the secret message of *The X-Files*: that we must confront the sense in which our own lives are paranormal in order to take personally the lives of people who are different from ourselves. But it remains to be seen whether this task demands that we become workaholics.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Kim Nicolini, Jillian Sandell, Annalee Newitz, Gillian Epstein, Bill Graebner, Jim Carruthers, and Joel Schalit for their help on previous drafts of this paper.

1. An episode from late in *The X-Files*' fifth season explored a similar phenomenon as an example of "hiding in the light" ("Folie à Deux").

2. For a short, but illuminating discussion of the detective genre from a psychoanalytic perspective, see Westlake.

3. Of course, the same could be said about same-sex partnerships. Within the context of present-day network television, however, it is highly unlikely that the sexual tension between same-sex partners would become overt.

4. I am indebted to Bill Graebner's help on this point. It is interesting that *Millennium*, the new series Chris Carter has created for Fox, presents a scenario in which the protagonist's wife has already been domesticated from the outset. In the show's first episodes, she is someone to be protected, not only from the dangers of her husband's work, but from the knowledge of what it involves. Professional exchanges of the sort Scully and Mulder share are out of the question.

5. For a detailed discussion of the difference between episodic and serial form, see Feuer (1987 and 1990). Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein argue that the success of *The X-Files* is partially attributable to its creators' deft handling of this hybrid narrative form that combines elements of the episodic drama and the serial drama. The fact that the *Star Trek* series has the same form supports this claim.

6. For an enlightening discussion of the difference between popular conceptions of the home and the realities which they obscure, see Coontz.

7. Comparing *The X-Files* to *Millennium* is instructive in this case as well. *Millennium*'s protagonist Frank Black is obsessed with preventing his work from intruding on his home. In fact, this is his motivation for trying to keep his wife in the dark about his work. To the extent that *Millennium* has an ongoing narrative like *The X-Files*, it is principally concerned with the conflict between this desire to preserve the home as a refuge and all of the factors that conspire to make it vulnerable to the pressures of the workplace. In this regard, it is interesting that the show's title sequence features a picture of what seems to be an ideal middle-American home over which the words "Who cares?" are superimposed in large white letters. It is possible to read this question as an implicit response to the statement "The Truth is Out There" that comes at the end of most of *The X-Files* title sequences. Interpreted along these lines, *Millennium*'s "Who cares?" seems to remind us that the "in here" of the home stands to suffer if we are more interested in pursuing the truth "out there." Of course, the vast majority of both series' viewers watch them within the "in here" of their own domestic space, so *Millennium*'s question can also be viewed as a call for its audience to reflect on the home, which seems to be under assault by a host of forces "out there." I am grateful to Kim Nicolini and Annalee Newitz for their insights on the relationship between *The X-Files* and *Millennium*.

8. There are a number of mass-market books that compile information on *The X-Files* for its fans. For my own research I used Lovece's "unauthorized" guide.

9. In an analysis that takes this unpaid domestic labor into account, economist Juliet B. Schor calculates that the average American worked 163 more hours per year in 1987 than she or he would have in 1969 (Schor, 29). Responding to people who insist on the incommensurability of professional life and "pleasurable" activities such as parenting, she notes that "the fact that we enjoy our labor or find it satisfying does not mean that it is not work." From Schor's perspective, a person who enjoys the work of being a parent is not that different from a person who enjoys the work of being a doctor or lawyer (Schor, 85).

10. With the advent of the modern scientific worldview, women came to be stereotyped as 'believers' in contrast to men. But perhaps because of this stereotyping, the figure of the woman-as-skeptic has proved to be a particularly unsettling one in the culture. Along the same lines as the narrative in which the professional woman is domesticated, there are numerous stories in which a disbelieving woman is made to assume the role of believer. As Bill Graebner pointed out to me, so 'wholesome' a movie as *Miracle on 34th Street* concerns a disbelieving woman and her disbelieving daughter who must learn the importance of believing in Santa Claus.

11. For a discussion of "normal science" and its relation to "paradigm shifts," consult Kuhn. Because *The X-Files* devotes so much energy to exploring the possible limitations of what passes for "normal science" these days, it would be fruitful to examine both the show itself and the real-world debates on which it draws from the perspective of Kuhn's thesis. It is impossible to determine whether a successful paradigm shift is underway. There is certainly a great deal of resistance to the so-called "pseudo-science" that seeks to provide insight about the blindspots of "normal science," from the repeated denunciations of psychoanalysis, to the dismissal of paranormal phenomena, to the cultural approach to science parodied in Alan Sokal's much-publicized hoax in the leftist journal *Social Text*.

As the popularity of *The X-Files* attests, however, there are a great many people who "want to believe" that today's "normal science" is seriously lacking.

12. The abruptness of this transition is unsettling, but not unrealistic. Scully's rapid return to work implicitly refers to the difficulties that confront professionals when their personal lives intrude on their work. More specifically, it attests to the hardships working women face during pregnancy. As most regular viewers know, Scully does not appear in the two weeks between parts one and three of the abduction episode because actress Gillian Anderson was on maternity leave.

13. Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions lends some credence to the notion that the distinction between "normal science" and conspiracy theory is not as clear-cut as is commonly believed.

14. The word "drone" has a number of different meanings. It refers to male bees who do not work, but stay in the hive in order to fertilize the queen; to a person who lives off the work of others; to a remote-controlled aircraft; and to a monotonous sound. It is impossible to discern which of these meanings Reich intends to foreground. Considering the fact that he is talking about workers who exemplify the "hive mind," he may be making a common mistake. In the popular imagination, worker bees are frequently called "drones," perhaps because they are responsible for the droning sound of the beehive. But regardless of Reich's intentions, his use of the word "drone" is likely to make his readers think of bees. I am indebted to Jim Carruthers for pointing out the distinction between worker bees and drones.

15. For an understanding of the precarious security of the professional middle class, Ehrenreich's landmark book is invaluable.

16. This point was inspired by conversations with my colleague Annalee Newitz.

17. In this respect, *The X-Files* bears a disturbing resemblance to right-wing conspiracy theories of the sort that have motivated the anti-governmental activities of Timothy McVeigh, the Montana Freeman, and other militia members. I am thankful for Joel Schalit's help in making this connection.

18. As Bill Graebner suggested to me, this depiction of cell phones as a sign of "over-connection" contrasts in interesting ways with the depiction of telephones as a sign of isolation in film noir. In a sense, over-connection and isolation are opposite sides of the same coin.

19. For all of its originality, *The X-Files* builds on the legacy of a number of influential shows. Discussing television shows from the 1970s that focused on the workplace, Ella Taylor notes that they feature protagonists who "are absolutely committed to the protection of the average citizen, not so much from criminals, hucksters, or lunatics, but precisely from the clutches of those who hold impersonal power—the 'abstract' professionals, public officials, and business executives (Taylor, 147). This description certainly fits Scully and Mulder. Elsewhere in her book, Taylor provides a particularly striking account of the cultural context from which *The X-Files* emerged. She explains the emergence of a "television work-family" in the same shows that she describes above. This work-family expressed both "the yearning for meaning and community in the workplace" and "the fear of the power of corporations and of professionals in corporate settings." She goes on to note that "in the imagery of television, as in much intellectual commentary at the time, this fear deepened into a vague but persuasive post-Watergate mistrust by ordinary Americans of the political and economic institutions that shaped their lives from a great distance and of the elites who dominated the corporate sector (Taylor, 14). In a sense, *The X-Files* reflects a return to these concerns of the 1970s.

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